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Nathaniel H. Preston

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NOTES

WHITMAN'S "SHADOWY DWARF": A SOURCE IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY

An unusual image lies hidden among the twists and turns of flamboyant prose in Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*. In a particularly lyrical passage, Whitman writes of "a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal." He describes this mystical experience for several more lines before concluding: "Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value. Like the shadowy dwarf in the fable, once liberated and look'd upon, it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven."[1] Most readers have passed over this strange mention of a "shadowy dwarf" without comment, and it certainly is a cryptic reference. Its origin, however, becomes clear when we refer to the story of Vāmana, an avatar of Vishnu (Viṣṇu) in Hindu mythology.

According to this legend, a demon named Bali conquered Indra and the other gods and established himself as ruler of the "triple world" of earth, atmosphere, and heaven. The gods, naturally distressed by this development, sought the assistance of Viṣṇu, who agreed to take birth and win back the world for them. He was born as a dwarf named Vāmana and went to see Bali. The demon, aware that he was being visited by the Lord, offered the dwarf a gift. Vāmana asked for just three steps of land for his own sacrificial ground. Receiving this boon, he expanded to the size of the universe and then crossed the earth, atmosphere, and heaven in his three strides, thereby reclaiming the entire universe for the gods.[2] The resemblance between the passage in Whitman and this Hindu legend is easy to see: both refer to a dwarf who expands to cosmic proportions in order to reach heaven. Since this story is, to my knowledge, unique among world literature, it is safe to say that Whitman encountered a version of the legend and incorporated it into the above passage from *Democratic Vistas*.

It would be valuable for our knowledge of Whitman's reading to determine where he found the story, but unfortunately there are too many possibilities to be sure. According to Deborah A. Soifer, there are thirty versions of the Vāmana myth in Hindu literature, including versions in the two major epics—the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana.[3] While we therefore cannot be certain of his source, it seems probable that he encountered it in the Rāmāyana or in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, since those were among the few Hindu texts readily available in mid-nineteenth century America: Horace Wilson published a translation of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa in 1840, and William Carey's version of the Rāmāyana appeared as early as 1810.[4]

Despite our lack of certainty as to its specific textual source, this allusion in Whitman's prose sheds light on the connection between Whitman and certain aspects of Hindu thought. In the 1960s and 1970s, V. K. Chari and T. R.

Rajasekharaiah initiated a long line of Whitman criticism by respectively painting the poet as a seer into Vedāntic truths and as a secret borrower from Hindu texts.[5] While many passages from Whitman's poetry are undeniably evocative of Indian religion in general, and the various forms of Vedānta philosophy in particular,[6] the response to Chari's and Rajasekharaiah's theories has been largely skeptical, primarily because there are few passages in Whitman's writings that reveal any depth of knowledge of Hindu tradition. As critics inevitably point out, Whitman himself gave conflicting reports on the degree to which he was familiar with Hindu and other "Eastern" religious texts. Henry David Thoreau, in a letter to Harrison Blake from December 1856, recounts his first meeting with Whitman. Thoreau remarked that his poems were "wonderfully like the Orientals" and asked Whitman if he had read them. Whitman's reply was "No; tell me about them."[7] However, in his 1888 "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Whitman asserts that he had read "the ancient Hindoo poems," among other important works of world literature, in preparation for writing the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.[8]

Given Whitman's rather typical equivocation about his reliance on these texts, we must content ourselves with examining his works to see what they reveal about his acquaintance with Hinduism and other religions. In the case at hand, Whitman shows a deeper knowledge of Hinduism than most critics have given him credit for. The Vāmana avatar is not one of the larger figures in Hindu mythology. Although an incarnation of God, he is only one of some ten past and future occasions when Viṣṇu descends to earth to protect the righteous and persecute the iniquitous. The best known avatars of Viṣṇu are Rāmā and Kṛṣṇa, who are primary characters in the two major epics mentioned above and who are still major focuses of religious adoration (*bhakti*) in India today. Vāmana, in comparison, is a minor figure, and by bringing him into *Democratic Vistas* Whitman shows an awareness of some specific details of Hindu tradition that could not be derived from common knowledge or a perusal of the "Ethnical Scriptures" in *The Dial*.

What is remarkable is that Whitman doesn't bother to announce the Hindu origin of his mythological reference and seems more interested in using the story to explain an abstract state of mind. In other words, the Vāmana myth is useful to Whitman for its specific content rather than its "exoticism" as a Hindu tale, and this would indicate that Hindu thought played a more than superficial role in his intellectual life. It is true, of course, that Whitman often does use Hindu references in a sensationalistic way. He concludes the poem "Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?," for example, with the phrase "Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion?"[9] In this case, he appears to use a Sanskrit word for theatrical effect, since "illusion" expresses his meaning just as well as "maya." In the case of Vāmana, though, he employs an image from Hindu mythology purely as means of illustrating his own thought without any emphasis on its Indian origin. While there are many more such references in his writings well worth exploring, these two serve to indicate Whitman's inconsistent approach toward Hindu myth and philosophy as well as other religious traditions: he unsystematically absorbed whatever he found convenient or attractive.

The question of Whitman's use of Hindu sources therefore cannot have an easy answer. While Rajasekharaiah and Chari probably do go too far in their assumptions about Whitman's familiarity with and acceptance of Indian religion, he nonetheless had a deeper acquaintance with it than most critics allow, and he used it both as a source of ideas and as a means to add an air of exoticism to his poems.

University of Tennessee NATHANIEL H. PRESTON

NOTES

1 *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1963-1964), 2:394. Abbreviated *PW*.

2 Deborah A. Soifer, *The Myths of Narasimha and Vamana: Two Avatars in Cosmological Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2-3.

3 Soifer, 5.

4 J. P. Rao Rayapati, *Early American Interest in Vedanta: Pre-Emersonian Interest in Vedic Literature and Vedantic Philosophy* (New York: Asia, 1973), 115-116.

5 V. K. Chari, *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964); T. R. Rajasekharaiah, *The Roots of Whitman's Grass* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970).

6 Most critics who discuss Whitman and Vedānta simply use "Vedānta" to mean "*Advaita Vedānta*," the non-dualistic school of Vedāntic philosophy, but a case can be made that in later years his more theistic poems like "Prayer of Columbus" reflect the devotion-oriented ontology of Rāmānuja's "Qualified Non-dualism" or Viśiṣṭādvaita school of Vedānta.

7 Henry David Thoreau, *Familiar Letters*, ed. F. E. Sanborn (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1894), 347.

8 *PW*, 2:722.

9 "Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?," *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 123.